

July 8, 1970

Honorable William A. Steiger  
House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Steiger:

Thank you very much for your thoughtful letter of June 22. My proposals for a task force to create an overview of genetic disease and its control were intentionally much less ambitious than the scope of the issues presented in your letter. I must admit that I have become somewhat impatient with much of the lurid journalism that has attached to the question of genetic engineering but must agree that this is all the more reason to help cultivate a more thoughtful basis for our social commitments in this area.

Much the same question was presented in Senator Mondale's proposal for a national commission a couple of years ago and I will include, together with a fair amount of other material, a copy of my testimony addressed to it. I have felt that it would be most unfortunate to extract this issue from the general context of social and technological progress.

This leads me to conclude that your own committee might indeed provide the most favorable environment for an oversight of biological together with other technological advances. So I might amend my earlier response to Mr. Margolis and ask that you do include the long-range social implications of genetic intervention in the mandate of the joint committee.

I am in the midst of preparing some additional papers directed at precisely the kinds of questions that your letter raised and hope that I may impose them upon your attention as they are ready.

If I may put my present situation in a few words it is that we face very urgent medical problems that we can hardly afford to ignore; but that we must also address ourselves to the long-range implications of methods of biological intervention in order to bolster our confidence in the sustenance of individual freedom. If I may repeat a well-worn simile, techniques of genetic intervention are very similar to the use of a surgeon's scalpel. In the framework of the healing arts and respect for the needs of the individual patient it can do incalculable good. Where law has not been developed to protect the integrity of the person the scalpel can also be used to make anaesthetized or a compliant

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beast of burden. In my view the freedom of the person is vulnerable to many more insidious and immediate assaults, and I do not see an urgent requirement for much new legislation to cover biological intrusions. However these prospects make it all the more important that we not allow our historic traditions of human rights to falter.

One further argument. Ad hoc commissions have such a poor record of implementation of their proposals that I much prefer the approach of a standing legislative committee for oversight as a durable institution.

Sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

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